

Easter 2B: John 20:19-31
Church of the Good Shepherd
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Finite, Flawed, Failed, Forgiven

“How One Stupid Tweet Ruined One Woman’s Life.” That was how the New York Times described the story of Justine Sacco. In 2013, Justine Sacco was a 30-year-old NY-based Sr. Director of Communications. While en route for a holiday late that year, she wiled her time by tweeting a series of personal jokes. At JFK, she remarked on a German traveler’s body odor. At Heathrow in London she posted an acerbic remark about the British and bad teeth. Then, as she embarked on the final leg of her trip to South Africa, she sent the Tweet to her 170 followers that ruined her life and ended her PR career: “Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding! I’m white.” On the 11-hour flight Justine rested, unaware of the firestorm she’d caused. Upon landing, she saw a text from her best friend, Hannah. “I’m so sorry to see what’s happening.” Then “You need to call me immediately.” The outrage over her insensitive note had gone viral. Tens of thousands of Tweets, articles, and even death threats followed. While she’d slept on the plane, #HasJustineLandedYet became the Internet’s #1 trend. Within hours, upon learning of the fury, the company she worked for fired her. Sacco explained afterwards that she was herself South African and that she meant her last tweet as ironic, as making fun of American ignorance of South Africa. But it didn’t matter. Her life and career were in shambles, on account of a single insensitive tweet.

Sacco’s story may seem extreme, but stories like hers have become increasingly common in recent years. Someone does something wrong, something that doesn’t conform to current mores, and that’s it. They will forever be associated with the worst thing they ever said or did. They can never be rid of the mistake, can never get past it, never live it down.

That was what the eleven disciples feared when Jesus showed up that first Easter evening. One might have thought Jesus’ followers would be elated to see their friend and teacher alive again, literally risen from the grave! Except that things between Jesus and his disciples hadn’t ended on a good note. The last time they saw him, Jesus had been arrested, and they ran away, hiding from the authorities. They had just the night before swore up and down that they’d stick by him no matter what. Peter had loudly claimed he would die for him, but he abandoned Jesus too, worse, he denied he ever knew him. They were all understandably ashamed, and likely expected Jesus to lay into them right then and there, at the very least to say how disappointed he was with them. And Jesus had every right to.

But instead of scolding them, Jesus greets them with: “Peace be with you.” This was the last thing they expected. But it was apparently Jesus’ first concern. Peace. Despite all that had happened since the last time they saw him—their running away, Peter’s denial, his torture and death—peace was the most important thing Jesus wanted to communicate to them. Not anger, not disappointment, not suspicion, not even ‘Let me tell you where I’ve been.’ But rather peace.

Jesus declares ‘Peace’ three times in this passage. Now, if he meant only to reassure them that ‘It’s alright, all is well, I’m not holding a grudge,’ once, *maybe* twice, would be enough. But

saying it three times makes you think that there was more to his greeting than just putting the disciples at ease. Coming as it does right after the resurrection, about what had happened to him, that it was an explanation for his being raised from the dead. The Resurrection, he seems to be saying, was not just about righting a wrong (the death of an innocent man), even less about making it so that now we can go to heaven. Rather it is about peace, it is about the making *for* peace.

And by peace, I don't mean a personal inner tranquility, but peace as in harmony, everything being as it should, our being in right relationship with God and with each other—*that* kind of peace. *Shalom*, the Jews call it—peace as it was in the beginning, at creation before the eruption of sin, peace as it will be when Christ returns, when all things are reconciled to him. This, this kind of peace, is what Jesus is talking about, what Jesus is about, what the Resurrection is about. *And* what his followers are to be about too.

Which is why he commissions the eleven to forgive. "Receive the Holy Spirit." Jesus says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." That is the mission of his followers, of us Christians—to announce God's message of forgiveness, to extend the forgiveness we've received to others.

This is different than how we usually see our calling. As Episcopal priest Robert Capon puts it: "The church is not in the morals business. The world is in the morals business, quite rightfully; and it has done a fine job of it, all things considered. The history of the world's moral codes is a monument to the labors of many philosophers, and it is a monument of striking unity and beauty. As C.S. Lewis said, anyone who thinks the moral codes of mankind are all different should be locked up in a library and be made to read three days' worth of them. He would be bored silly by the sheer sameness."

What the world cannot get right, Capon argues, is the business of forgiveness – which is the church's real job. The Church is in the world to deal with Sin which the world can't turn off or escape from. We are not, he says, in the business of telling the world what's right and wrong so that it can do good and avoid evil. We are in the business of offering, to a world which knows all about that tiresome subject, forgiveness for its chronic unwillingness to take its own advice."

Now, I don't know if we can any longer say that the world has done a "fine job" in carrying out the business of morals. There is plenty of evidence that the morals of the world are way out of whack. But Capon's larger point still holds. Even if the world has fallen down on its job, even if the morals the world promotes and polices are perverse, it is not our job as the church to correct them. Our job is *above* that, or we might say, *below* that, in the sense that we exist to catch those who've fallen through, who've failed to live up to the world's skewed morality. And that job is even more important when the world is confused about right and wrong.

To those who've failed to live up to the world's messed up morals, who've been persecuted for standing up against popular opinion, who've insisted on speaking the truth, on defending what is right, and have suffered for it, to them we can say, We understand. The world doesn't like us either. Our leaders, elected and otherwise, have sneered at our values, disrespected our holy days and shown outright hostility to people of faith. We know what is like to not measure up to the

world's standards, we know what it's like to be shamed, dismissed, hounded by people who delight in tearing down anyone who doesn't tow the party line. Even if what you've done is something we all agree is wrong—even then—the Church is there to say, We know you've failed, we know you were hurt, but we love you and we are not going to hold it against you. In God's name, we forgive you.

But forgiveness is not just good for those who've been broken, who've failed, who couldn't live up to the increasingly puritanical rules of the world. It is necessary for everyone, for every community and people, necessary if we are to live together peaceably.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt addressed this issue sixty years ago at a conference titled 'Moral Decisions in an Affluent Society'. Towards the end of her lecture, she reflected on the fact that, whenever we act, no matter our reasons or aims, we cannot know what the consequences of our actions will be. The "frailty and unreliability of human affairs" means that we are constantly acting in a 'web of relationships' in which "every action touches off not only a reaction but a chain reaction." As a result "we can never really know what we are doing." Which would be bad enough, but our actions are also "irreversible." They cannot be undone even if the consequences "prove disastrous."

And if that was the case sixty years ago, before the dawn of the internet, how much more is it today? Today nothing you say or do online ever disappears. If it can be recorded and saved and shared, it will be, which means it never goes away. Our mistakes can follow us forever.

The result is that we are always on our guard, always looking over our shoulders, always vulnerable to being exposed as less than morally perfect or simply wrong, not just by our enemies but even by our friends. I was just reading an article about how many teens maintain a cache of screenshots on their cellphones (photos and pictures of digital messages) so that they can incriminate their friends, in the event that down the road their friends turn on them and use something they said or did years ago against them.

This happened to Mimi Groves, a high school senior in Leesburg, VA who'd been accepted to her dream college only to have the invitation rescinded after a classmate shared a video clip from four years prior. The video included Groves uttering a racial slur, not against someone but in excitement at getting her driver's license. The video was sent by way of a private messaging app, but a classmate who'd received the clip from someone else, and kept it until he could use it against her. Groves, now 19, acknowledged she was wrong, but that didn't matter. The damage was done. She had sinned, her sin was immortalized on the internet, and that was it. I sympathize with the generation coming up. Of course they are hypersensitive and hyper-cautious. The cost of acting in the world today has never been higher.

Arendt points to a solution, to another way. In her lecture, she offers: "Only one tool exists to ameliorate the irreversibility of our actions. That is the faculty of forgiving. Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would...be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victim of its consequences for ever." Only forgiveness can free us from the chains of our mistakes. Only forgiveness can remove the weight of our sins.

We used to understand this. Our society knew how to deal with bad behavior, in a way that the offender learned from their mistakes, while keeping open the possibility of reconciliation, the possibility of recovery. Even those who were not especially devout respected someone who had visibly atoned. Which is why the old PR advice was simply to “apologize and move on.”

No longer. The world today can watch someone apologize yet doggedly refuse to move on. In fact, the apology tends to make things worse. In a society obsessed with “justice,” with making an example of offenders, there is no provision for clemency, for mercy, for forgiveness. No one can ever atone for a mistake, the shame can never let up. And so we are fast on the road to our utter destruction, breaking down trust with every accusation, inciting bitterness and resentment with every act of public shaming, making retaliation and violence ever more likely. We cannot seem to find a way out of this trap.

Even our church leaders get caught up in this game. They spend much of their time talking about current shibboleths, echoing the world’s moral preoccupations, rather than preaching the actual gospel. And so the people never hear perhaps the most extraordinary and truly revolutionary aspect of the Christian message – the commandment to forgive. To forgive not just those you like, who are on your side, those you agree with, those of your tribe. But those you don’t like, who’ve hurt you, who make you afraid and uncomfortable. We are commanded to forgive them too.

As we sit here in church on this Second Sunday of Easter, still basking in the glory of the Resurrection, we see that Easter is the answer not just to the problem of death, but also to the problem of life, of our living together with others as finite and flawed people. Our mistakes don’t have to haunt us, our failures don’t have to follow us. Those who’ve wronged us need not be condemned forever. There is an out. “Peace. Forgive.” Jesus says. “This is the way of life, the new life I offer.” Thanks be to God!